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Perspectives of Students Labeled with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders on Their Transition Programs

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PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS LABELED WITH EMOTIONAL AND/OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS ON THEIR TRANSITION PROGRAMS

ALLISON E. GARDNER

Submitted in fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Action Research Final Project of

ALLISON E. GARDNER

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements of the Master of Arts in Education Degree.

Date of Symposium: Monday, July 27, 2009

Date Completed: Monday, October 17, 2011

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Dr. Susan O'Connor, Reader

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my brave students, who have persevered through systems, educational and otherwise, while still remaining true to who they are and to who they aspire to become.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with great humility and appreciation that I thank Susan O'Connor, who was my first advisor, and who is now my thesis reader, for teaching me the absolute grave importance of perspective and for showing me the true nature of education, collaboration.

Thank you Elizabeth Ankeny, my thesis advisor, for your dedicated persistence and unparalleled patience. You embody the true spirit of the teacher as a guide, with grace and purpose, as well as humor and empathy, which I continually aspire to.

I am such a better teacher, and person, for having known you both.

ABSTRACT

PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS LABELED WITH EMOTIONAL AND/OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS ON THEIR TRANSITION PROGRAMS

ALLISON E. GARDNER

October 17, 2011

Action Research (EDC 587) Final Project

Many students with the disability label of Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) have a history of extreme difficulty and failure in traditional school settings. If these students remain in school or return to school to attend a transition program they may face some of the same challenges they faced in high school that prevented them from obtaining their diploma by the end of their senior year. This research examines the perspectives of four students labeled EBD on their current transition programming at Rosewood Transition Center (RTC). Incorporating student perspectives into transition program planning may directly impact student success. The students' perspectives illuminated themes involving curriculum, physical and social environments, and the relationships formed at RTC with peers, teachers, and staff.

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Chapter I: Introduction

A thin young woman walks into a small conference room her hands in the pockets of a black and red sweatshirt, hood up, her eyes behind long dyed blond bangs. She looks around, picks a chair and slides down so far that the top of her head is level with the back of the chair. The fluorescent lit room vibrates with a variety of faces; sad, thoughtful, angry, smiling. All faces are visible except for the face at the center of their attention, the young woman, the adult student. Soon everyone is talking, often all at once, over each other. The young woman gets up, her hood slips back slightly to reveal an earpiece connected by a thin white cord to an unseen audio device somewhere within the million folds of her sweatshirt. "Bullshit, same fucking bullshit." She walks out, audibly releasing a hard held store of breath. The meeting continues, without her.

Students with the Emotional and/or Behavioral Disordered (EBD) label consistently have the highest dropout rates of all disability categories (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Psychologists, social workers, teachers, and other educational professionals have expounded profusely on why these students continue to fail despite the best efforts of so many. It appears that everyone has been consulted on this phenomenon except the students themselves. The perspectives of students labeled EBD attending school-based transition programs have not been adequately researched by the educational community despite the fact that federal special education law mandates that the perspectives of young adult students with disabilities be an integral part of their own Individual Education Program (IEP) and transition plan (IDEA, 2004).

This research aims to add the valuable insights and perspectives of four students, labeled EBD, on their transition programs, to the body of research and knowledge available in the area of EBD and transition. The issues and concerns they raise are a starting point and a call for more in-depth studies incorporating adult student perspectives on the conception, development and improvement of transition programs serving students labeled EBD.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Legislative and Legal Requirements of Transition

IDEA mandated transition planning must reflect measureable postsecondary goals that are based on age-appropriate assessments to post-secondary education (college, technical school, career training), employment (obtaining, and maintaining a job), home living (obtaining and maintaining housing, nutrition, personal wellness, finances and budgeting), recreation and leisure (obtaining and maintaining social connections and self-identified areas of recreation), and community participation (issues of transportation, accessing community resources, participating in society). Students receiving special education services in high school may be eligible to receive public school services through transition programs until age 21 if they have significant needs on one or more of the five transition areas due to their disability.

Designing and implementing effective transition programs for students ages 18-21 with an EBD disability label require a comprehensive review of the legislative and legal requirements associated with applicable special education law, specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) and the No Child Left Behind legislation, Public Law 107-110 (NCLB). Portions of these laws address the public school system's legal responsibility to provide services to special education students ages 18-21 who are still in need of transition services.

The initial Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA, 1990) mandated transition services with the following statement: "As the

graduation rates for children with disabilities continue to climb, providing effective transition services to promote successful post-school employment or education is an important measure of accountability for children with disabilities." IDEA, 1990 specifically defined the legal obligations of school districts to provide transition services for special education students who demonstrate need (Cheny, 2004; IDEA, 1990).

In 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was amended. A notable difference from the 1990 definition was the inclusion of the student's "individual needs" and "preferences and interests" in the transition planning process. IDEA was updated once again in 2004 requiring that transition services begin by age 16 and that a statement of service needs be included in the IEP by age 14 (NICHCY, 1999).

Public Law 107-110, otherwise known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), called for standards-based education and mandates that all teachers instructing core content areas be highly qualified. Singleton and Nuebert (2004) considered the possible implications of NCLB on transition education for students labeled EBD. They concluded that NCLB may have a positive effect on the education of students labeled EBD because NCLB mandates that all educators deliver programming that reflects the expectation that these students can perform at a level commensurate with their non-disabled peers. In addition, Singleton and Nuebert (2004) offered specific guidelines for teachers and transition providers to follow when integrating the new NCLB mandates into the transition planning process. Yet there are concerns that NCLB forces schools and teachers to

minimize functional transition skill instruction in favor of traditional academic instruction to prepare students for standardized testing which is often the determining factor in funding issues under NCLB (Williams-Diehm, Benz, 2008).

Educating Transition Age Students Labeled EBD

Educating students labeled EBD, more specifically, adolescent and/or transition level students labeled EBD, must be considered contextually to provide the relevant information needed to fully comprehend the complexities associated with effectively educating this unique population. Providing meaningful and effective programming for students labeled EBD offers challenges at every age. Students labeled EBD may have deficits in the areas of social skills, mental health, and academic achievement, all of which may negatively affect their ability to successfully transition into young adulthood (Armstrong, Dedrick & Greenbaum, 2003).

Students that have had academic, social and emotional difficulties in high school may face the same challenges while attending transition programs. In most states, students eighteen years of age or older who are not under guardianship may legally choose to drop out of school at age sixteen. Students labeled EBD consistently have had the highest dropout rates of all disability categories. The high school completion rate for students labeled with emotional disturbances was 56% compared to a rate of 72% for all disabilities (NLTS2 Fact Sheet, 2005). Only 40.2 % of students labeled as EBD have attended a post-secondary school three to five years after high school. With post-secondary statistics this dismal it was not surprising that the competitive employment rates three to five years after

secondary school among students labeled as EBD was 47.4% as compared to the general population rate of 69% (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). It is equally important to consider the quality of employment available to these students. The percentage of youth in the general population who earn minimum wage or more is 69% as compared to 50% of youth identified as EBD (NLTS2 Data Brief, 2004). According to the National Longitudinal Transitional Study 2 (NTLS2) completed in 2005, the percentage of youth labeled with an emotional disturbance who are living independently up to four years after high school was 19.2 % which was a -8.0 % decline from data gathered during the first National Longitudinal Transitional Study (NTLS) (NTLS Data Brief, 2010).

Youth having the EBD label were more likely than youth with other disabilities to exhibit difficulties adhering to school rules and community laws and regulations. Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 reveal that almost two-thirds of youth diagnosed with emotional disabilities have a history of delinquency in school. They also have the highest rates of arrest at 34.8% among all other disability categories, which is 2.5 times the arrest rate of the second highest disability category of Other Health Impaired (OHI) (NTLS Report, 2003).

Students labeled EBD who reach transition age may continue to face these same problems as adults. This is why the necessity of effective skill building in social, academic, and vocational functioning becomes even more crucial. Educators are challenged to develop strategies and interventions that will improve

the outcomes of students in transition programs with significant social and mental health deficits (Lane & Carter, 2006).

Self-Determination

IDEA, 2004 clearly stated that students must be an integral part of the planning and implementation of their educational programming. For this to happen, the student must possess self-determination skills.

Wehmeyer (1996) defined self-determination as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference" (p. 24). Miller (1995) offered a similar definition: "Self-determination fits within an emerging paradigm of special education that views people with disabilities as active agents in their own lives rather than as only the passive recipients of help from the nondisabled world" (no page number given).

Why is it important to teach self-determination skills to students labeled EBD? The assessment, identification and resulting placement and programming of students labeled EBD have shown a distinct history of being deficit-based. Special education teachers are often trained to write goals and provide instruction based on the identification of their students' deficits rather than on their strengths (Hua and Bunsen, 2004). If educators expect to fulfill the legal requirements of IDEA, 2004, they must teach students specific self-determination skills such as; taking responsibility, planning and participating in the IEP and goal setting process, constructing codes of conduct, managing conflict, problem-solving, self-assertiveness, self-management, participation in lesson and activity planning and

implementation and adopting leadership roles (Miller, 1995). Research substantiated that teaching self-determination skills to students labeled EBD helped to reduce violent behavior (Hua & Bunsen, 2004; Dunlap, dePerczel, Clarke, Wilson, & Kern, 1994), improve academic skills (Hua & Bunsen, 2004; Lazarus, 1993) and personal relationships (Hua & Bunsen, 2004; Miller et al., 1995). The development of self-determination skills is an essential part of any transition program.

Student Centered Collaboration

While it is crucial that students be active participants in their education, they are not, by any means, the only stakeholders in the process. Special education transition planning was legally required to be a collaborative process (IDEA 2004, Section 1414(d)(1)(B). This means that participation and contributions from relevant persons should be included when designing a student's educational plan. The team must include, a general education teacher, a special education teacher who is licensed in the student's area of disability, a transition specialist, and a school district representative who has the authority to allocate funding and resources. Relevant community representatives should also be included on a transition student's IEP team. These representatives may include a county case manager, a state vocational rehabilitation representative, a work or volunteer supervisor and any other outside social service or mental health agency representative who plays a major role in the student's program.

Vocational education in a transition program should be delivered in cooperation with state vocational rehabilitation services. The two have similar

goals of increasing employability and building career skills. While vocational rehabilitation representatives may come into the school/transition center for meetings or to provide some services to the students, they can help bridge the gap between school and the community. State vocational rehabilitation services are available to other adults not currently in the public school system, and not necessarily labeled as disabled. Vocational rehabilitation offices, classrooms and services are usually offered in a community setting, not in a school (Dowdy & Evers, 1996).

Student centered collaboration with a variety of community service providers, including mental health providers, has shown to be one essential component of a successful transition program for students labeled EBD. Malloy, Cheny & Cormier (1998) evaluated data gathered from 17 youths with a mean age of 18 who participated in Project RENEW. Project RENEW was a program funded by the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services Administration which specifically focused on collaboration with outside community service providers. Over 18 months the study tracked high school graduation rates, post-secondary enrollment, employment and wages earned per hour. Results indicated that students who participated in this collaborative-based program improved in all areas.

The role of the student's family was identified as another integral part of a student-centered collaborative planning process (NICHCY, 1999). Sitlington & Neubert (2004) emphasized the substantial benefits associated with participation by the student's family in the transition process. Families provided a tremendous

wealth of information about the student aiding providers in determining the student's most relevant transition needs. Families facilitated connections between other social service agencies, mental health providers and court systems. Families reinforced "self-management and self determination skills" across multiple settings. Lastly, family members acted as mentors, role models and instructors for other parents as well as advocates and instigators of broader system changes when needed (Pleet, Wandry & Gunsch, 2004).

Underrepresentation of Student Perspectives

Although IDEA, 2004 mandated that the student's "preferences and interests" be included in the IEP planning process, there has been limited research detailing the experiences and perspectives of students labeled EBD on their transition programs.

Murray (2004) interviewed six students labeled EBD enrolled in a transition program along with their staff. He identified four basic themes considered relevant by participants; a team consensus to include individual student perspectives, student supports that include community and outside agencies as part of the school plan, dynamic and relevant curriculum, and "an atmosphere that includes necessary growth skills and ongoing support" (Murray, 2004, p.83).

Wagner and Davis (2006), using data from the 1990 National Longitudinal Transitional Study, concluded that student participation in educational planning and implementation was a crucial element of a successful transition plan. A natural result of student self-advocacy within transition programs included a

change in the traditional role of the educator, from a more directive role to one of a partner, or a facilitator. Students were expected to have ownership in their education and share in the responsibilities and the rewards of the process. This sentiment, reflected in IDEA, 2004, stipulated that transition services must be "based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests" (Sec. 602,34). This applied to all students with disabilities, however; this dictate seemed especially applicable when considering the specific challenges facing educators who strive to develop effective transition programs for adult students labeled EBD.

In a study examining the self-determination abilities of transition-age students with high-incident disabilities, authors found that students labeled EBD, possibly due to their disability related deficits in social-skills and self-awareness, lacked adequate self-determination skills. They speculated that the focus on behavioral modification in many educational programs serving students labeled EBD may over-shadow opportunities for self-determination instruction. In addition, many students with severe emotional and/or behavioral needs may be placed in very restrictive settings further limiting their ability to gain valuable experience in the area of self-determination. Implications of this study included the need for greater opportunities for students to practice self-determination skills specifically through direct involvement in their individualized transition assessment, planning and program implementation (Carter, Trainor, Owens, Sweden & Sun, 2010).

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Carter, Trainor, Sun & Owens (2009) using the Transition Planning Inventory (TPI) assessment completed a study examining the perspectives of teachers, students and their parents on each of the transition related areas represented on the TPI. They found significant variability among assessor with regard to relevancy of each assessment area as well as whether the assessor felt that that s/he had enough information to assess the student in a specific area. The authors conclude that these findings highlight the need for multiple perspectives within the transition process.

Ankeny and Lehman (2010) provided student perspectives on their experiences in a community college centered transition program. The students in the narrative-based study experienced immersion an into "mainstream" peer experiences. They were not physically, emotionally or educationally confined to a transition center for "disabled" students. They were truly part of the community college experience. They had transition services that were not the center of their education but the "lynchpin" that assisted the students in holding together all the necessary components of any young person's first experience with post-secondary education; community, academic and family supports.

The evolution of this highly specialized area of teaching, educating transition students labeled EBD, has produced a variety of opinions and prescriptions for best practice. Nevertheless, there continues to be a need for student perspectives in this area of educational research.

The intention of this research study is to begin a dialog of critical issues between those who have traditionally been the decision makers in special

education transition planning (teachers, administrators, parents) and those who are the main stakeholders within the process, the students themselves, as was intended in IDEA, 2004.

Chapter IV: Methodology

The primary goal of this research was to gather and analyze the perspectives of students with the EBD label regarding their transition programs. Outcomes from this research may be useful for guiding practice in this crucial area of education and in suggesting possible future research endeavors within the field of transition education for students labeled EBD.

Research Framework

Action research based practices and philosophies guided this study. Action research is a "systematic inquiry done by teachers (or other individuals in the teaching-learning environment) to gather information about-and subsequently improve-how their particular schools operate, how they teach and how well their students learn" (Mills, 2007, p. 20). Action research operates on the fundamental belief that teachers, by nature, are professional researchers in their classroom. The information they obtain from their students is not only employed as a means for understanding pedagogy better, but for the purpose of enhancing and improving teaching and learning on a daily basis. Action research encourages teacher self-empowerment and grassroots decision-making based on the unique experiences of each teacher and her/his students. Research outcomes are intended to guide future practice, policy and programming (Mills, 2007). Action research consists of learning through professional practice, processing gathered information through reflection and then reforming one's practice based on the outcomes of the research. Action research is not a one-way process. It is, rather, a cyclical upward

spiral towards the improvement of practice. Ideas and approaches towards pedagogy are continually examined, reviewed and enhanced (Riel, 2010).

The personal nature of this study required that data be gathered and evaluated using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research techniques promote an atmosphere of open-endedness that portrays truth as a condition existing not as an absolute, but as a set of variables at play during the process of information gathering (Leedy and Omrond, 2005). Qualitative methods assume that meaning exists not as an

objective truth, rather, it is generated within the social context of the participants. The researcher begins the process but allows the research outcomes to evolve reflecting the personal and social reality of the participants (Crowley, 1994-1995).

Data Collection

Data was collected through two focus group sessions and individual student interviews. Focus groups are ideal for gathering information within a social context. The researcher can witness social group communication and new ideas are often generated during the process (Breen, 2006). The unique relational dynamics of the focus group method facilitated an ideal arena for observation of the participants' shared experiences through their dialog and interactions (Anderson, 2001). The two focus groups were followed up with individual student interviews. During the interviews I was able to give each participant an opportunity to expand and clarify topics brought forth during the focus groups. Participants were also encouraged to introduce new thoughts or insights that may not have been brought forth as a part of the focus groups. Conducting both focus

groups and interviews enhanced the richness of the data gathered (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007).

Setting

All four students participants were attending a setting IV public school transition program, "Rosewood Transition Center (RTC)." The designation of federal setting IV indicates a program for students who attend a separate public day school in a class separate from their same-age non-disabled peers for their entire school day. There are fifteen federal special education settings. Only the first four pertain to public school education. What setting a student is placed in determines not only the level of special education support they will receive but also how much time they will be separated from their non-disabled peers during the school day. Setting III programs are for students who attend a separate special education class for more than 60% of their day. Students attending setting II programs receiving their special education services in a resource room for 21%-60% of their day, but attend their general education classes for the remainder of the day. Setting I indicates that the student spends the majority of their day with their non-disabled peers in their general education classroom but they may receive special education services outside of their general education classroom for up to 21% of their day.

RTC is located in a suburb of a major metropolitan city. The school district serves an ethnically, culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse population. A relatively new program, RTC is only in its fourth year of existence. Adult students ages 18-21 with Developmental and Cognitive

Disabilities (DCD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Other Health Impairments (OHI) and Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) labels attend the center. Approximately 43 students attend RTC. Not all of the students attend the center at the same time. Some of the students work and two students attend a local community college during the school day.

Most of the students attending the transition center had completed the necessary credit requirements to obtain their high school diploma. These students were there to improve their skills in the five transition areas. Approximately one-tenth of the students had not yet obtained the credits necessary for their high school diploma. All of these students had the EBD label. These students were referred to the transition center for unmet transition needs and also to complete the credits required to obtain their high school diploma.

Participants

All four research participants in this study had a current educational disability designation of EBD as well as unmet transition needs. They were all on my caseload. I am a special education teacher at the transition center where the participants attend. I hold current teaching licensure in the areas of EBD and SLD. The participants, Arianna, Samantha and Evan were all their own guardians. Henry's parents had limited legal guardianship over their son. All four students were voluntary participants.

Arianna.

Arianna is a twenty-year-old female student of African-American and Caucasian ancestry. She was a second year student at the transition center and is scheduled to return to the transition center next year. Arianna is one of four students at RTC who is a parent. She learned that she was pregnant during her senior year in high school. Despite having significant and multiple mental health diagnoses, Arianna did well in her classes. Her high school IEP team encouraged her to come to the transition center after high school to help her take college level classes in a community college setting. She was in the process of making a decision about which post-secondary institution to attend when she found out that she was pregnant. This knowledge caused her to change her focus. She needed parenting skills, household management and budgeting skills. Furthermore, it became even more crucial that she be able to manage her emotional needs.

Samantha.

Samantha is a twenty-year old female student of Caucasian ancestry. She is a second year student at the transition center and will be graduating in the spring of her second year. She is scheduled to begin attending a local cosmetology school in the summer. Samantha began at the transition center having earned only about half the amount of credits needed for a diploma during her high school career.

Evan.

Evan is a twenty-year-old male student of Caucasian ancestry. This was his second year at the transition center and he plans on returning next year.

Highly skilled in hands-on mechanical tasks, Evan spent much of his day outside of school fixing up old cars. Monte-Carlos were his favorite. In high school Evan had significant behavior issues ranging from excessive absences, skipping classes and constant refusal to complete work in class. He had a sharply clever sense of humor and was, at times, brutally honest with other students and staff. Most staff interpreted this behavior as disrespectful. Due to his Specific Learning Disability in reading and math he avoided most academic tasks either by exhibiting extreme withdrawn behavior while at school, or not attending at all. As a result, Evan did not graduate within four years and was referred to the transition center to complete his high school diploma requirements.

Henry.

Henry is a nineteen-year male student of Caucasian ancestry. He easily made friends with other students and was very loyal to his friends. Henry was very good working on computer, knew a lot about new music and when he made a promise he usually kept it. Henry, like Samantha and Evan, was unable to complete his required high school credits in time to graduate after four years. He has significant mental health needs and this prevented him from attending school on a regular basis and also made it difficult for him to focus for more than 15-20 minutes at a time in class. He attends the transition center to make up credits and to strengthen his transition skills.

Procedures

I informally discussed my research topic with each of the participants. I explained the research process and significance to each of them in detail. Each

student was read and offered a copy of the consent form. Each participant returned the form with his/her signature and parent signature when applicable.

The focus groups were scheduled to include all four participants, although due to various last-minute student schedule conflicts, all four students did not participate in both focus groups. Arianna, Samantha and Henry participated in the first focus group session, which lasted approximately 55 minutes. Samantha, Henry and Evan participated in the second focus group session, which lasted approximately 45 minutes. Therefore, each student participated in at least one focus group. Two students participated in both focus groups. The focus group discussions were loosely structured around the Interview/Focus Group Guiding Questions (See appendix A). However, our conversations evolved from the scripted questions as the group naturally appropriated what they considered as the most relevant discussion topics.

Following the focus groups, individual interviews were conducted with each student. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and concentrated on soliciting an expansion of the information that was initially gathered during the focus groups. The individual interviews allowed participants to give their perspectives in a more private and confidential setting than was available during the focus groups. I used my notes from the focus groups to loosely formulate questions for each individual's interview. The participants seemed more at ease during the interviews and I was able to gain a deeper understanding of issues they raised while participating in the focus group(s).

Data Analysis

I recorded, in narrative form, the questions, responses and other relevant information that occurred during both focus groups and during all interviews. From these written records, I was able to construct more detailed field notes. I then coded (using distinct colors for specific related text on 3x5 cards) the field notes into sub-categories. Coding is the process of organizing raw data into distinct themes and patterns (Mills, 2007). I physically mapped out the coded data into a concept map. A concept map is a visual tool for organizing themes in research. The researcher can easily view the data within a variety of organizational patterns based on relevant research questions (Mills, 2007).

Once a series of organized themes developed, I used grounded theory to develop my analysis. Grounded theory is a method of analysis that does not rely on a presumed hypothesis that can be proven or disproven with empirical research methods. Conversely, grounded theory begins with a question or set of questions as a research framework and then allows the data from the research to evolve naturally into a theory that was not necessarily presupposed prior to conducting the research. Glaser & Strauss (1967) contrast grounded theory to "theory generated by logical deductions from *a priori* assumptions" (p. 3). Theory generated from logical deductions begins with a formulated hypothesis then gathers and analyses data as it relates to that hypothesis while grounded theory begins with research questions but allows the hypothesis or hypotheses to develop as a cumulative result of the actual research process. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Chapter V: Findings

Students in transition programs, whether or not they are under legal guardianship, are usually young adults between the ages of 18 and 21. As adults, it is generally accepted that they should have already developed, or be in the process of developing, age-appropriate adult self-determination skills so that they may be active participants in their own education. Student input is an essential component in any individual transition plan and a direct manifestation of self-determination skills.

What are the perspectives of students labeled EBD on their transition programs and how can that information guide education practitioners in the development and improvement of transition programs who serve students labeled EBD? How can the perspectives of transition students labeled EBD be used to guide best practices in this unique area of education? What does this information tell us about the possible direction of future research in this area? These are some of the questions this study attempts to answer by listening to the students who have an EBD label and are currently attending a public school transition program. The focus groups and interviews provided a setting where the participants could discuss their impressions, thoughts, experiences and personal conclusions that they have developed while attending a transition center.

Several themes emerged throughout this process. The themes included a need for student identified meaningful curriculum, program environment considerations, and the importance of student relationships with peers and with teachers/staff. Each theme is vital to understanding how these students with an

EBD label view their transition programs and may be used to guide further research and practice in the field of transition.

" This school is more independent. You get more skills you actually need and not stuff to learn just to learn. You teach stuff you need in life to accomplish stuff in our lives."

The Importance of Meaningful Curriculum

When students begin a transition program, they may notice that the curriculum often differs greatly from what they studied in high school. Public high schools are mandated to teach students in special education curriculum that meets the state's academic standards and at the same time teach skills within the five transition areas. Often high schools cannot do both effectively within the temporal constraints of a school day. The result may be that some students possess few functional transition related skills when they enter a transition program after completing their senior year in high school. They may have spent most of their time in high school trying to catch up with their general education peers regardless of whether or not their personal career ambitions necessitated prepping for a traditional four-year or even a two-year college. The outcome for students can be the feeling that all their struggling will result in nothing tangible or meaningful relating to their own self-identified goals.

Halfway through her last year of high school Samantha decided to drop out. Her teachers had told her that due to her absences, she wouldn't receive credit for any of her current classes even if she came and completed passing work everyday until the end of the year. Samantha explained the futility she felt. "Anxiety, very angry, I didn't feel right....all I wanted to do is leave...very irritated. It was a waste of my time."

I asked Samantha, "It took you a couple years of going part time at RTC to earn your diploma through your IEP, but you did it. Why were you able to do that at RTC but not at the high school?" She explained, " This school is more independent. You get more skills you actually need and not stuff to learn just to learn. You teach stuff you need in life to accomplish stuff in our lives."

The phrase "stuff to learn just to learn" seems to capture what were many of my students' sentiments towards standards-based high school classes. They just could not understand how learning traditional academic subjects (such as geometry etc.) would help them accomplish their self-identified real-life goals. Samantha defined what meaningful curriculum meant to her.

> Now I am graduating on things I need to know. High school was just not a fit for me. It is better now to learn about reality. I got my license, I got my diploma, I am going to beauty school, I have financial aid, my bank account, all these things I needed to do in life rather than a math sheet.

While at RTC, Samantha applied for vocational rehabilitation services. She spent time understanding how to obtain the financial aid she would need to attend cosmetology school and how to advocate for the accommodations she would need to succeed there. She also worked on how to budget her money as a student, how to stay organized and how to take notes, and study for tests.

Samantha's dream since she was a child was to work as a cosmetologist, like her aunt. She learned from her aunt, that she did not need most of her senior classes in high school to be a cosmetologist. She just could not get past her belief

that she was "wasting her time." Samantha identified her personal goals from the beginning of the transition process. Relating everything she had to do at RTC back to her personal individual goals kept Samantha focused and believing that she was not wasting her time. This sentiment, the need for meaningful curriculum, is reiterated by many of my students labeled EBD.

Arianna expressed her need for meaningful curriculum by giving her opinion of the school store run by students at RTC. "I like the selling, and the budgeting, that's reality, budgeting." The students running the store applied the hands-on skills of managing inventory and sales they learn to their own personal bank accounts.

Part of Arianna's transition program had to include her needs as a young parent. Arianna explains, "I get help with my paperwork. There is a lot of paperwork when you have a child." Although Arianna's situation was different from Samantha's, they both shared the need for real-life learning. Transition center staff helped Arianna sign up for an early childhood parenting class. She also developed her own independent study project at the transition center focusing on her particular parenting needs. She put together a binder of information relating to her infant son. There were sections for medical information, nutrition, legal information, education, entertainment and toys.

I asked Arianna to talk about how her needs as a parent would be best served at the transition center. She requested an on-site daycare and classes specifically for young parents, and "like the binder I did. That would be good." Creating and maintaining an organized binder of information like this was a real

accomplishment for Arianna who, when she came to RTC, had very few organizational skills. Becoming an organized parent reduced the overall stress in her life and improved her emotional and educational functioning.

Like Samantha, Henry did not have enough credits to graduate after his senior year of high school. His self-identified goal was to obtain his high school diploma as fast as he could and leave RTC. He came to RTC because, as he puts it, "I just don't want to go four more years in high school." When I asked him what kind of classes or activities he thought would be beneficial for him, he suggested; "there should be art classes like painting, drawing and…you know, like molding things…" He eventually clarified "molding things" to mean sculpture. He also suggested "boxing." When I asked him to explain why these types of classes would be helpful for him he responded that they, "relieve stress."

Henry was able to take a ceramic class through a partnership with a local community center and he reported that this was a "good experience" for him. If alleviating stress was a current self-identified need for Henry, it made sense that our job at the transition center should begin by addressing that first. Unmanageable stress would necessarily affect his ability to obtain and maintain employment, engage in post-secondary learning and even sustain lasting social relationships in the community. Henry described what he was learning at RTC as, "what's in the real world not like bullshit high school. They (the staff at RTC) explain what's really important and relate it to real life basics that we need to know in the future."

Samantha also commented how the staff helped her to see how the work she did at RTC directly related to her self-indentified goals. "You explained why I should do this; related it to real life."

"All day I kept thinking, what can I do to leave here, because it wasn't a good atmosphere. There were just too many people, too many things going on at once."

The Importance of Flexible Learning Settings

Many of the students attending RTC expressed specific opinions related to the environment of the transition center. Addressing the physical location, Samantha said, "I wish it had its own individual building. It shouldn't be in a school building." RTC is located in a school building directly behind Rosewood High School (RHS) where many of these students had attended high school. Arianna stated, "I wish it was not by RHS." When I asked her to elaborate on why she felt this way, she explained that, "It is too distracting. I am drawn to RHS. I just want to run across the field and go over there."

For Arianna, high school seemed to represent a more carefree place full of social interaction. Samantha confirmed, "High school was just a social scene. I used to just wander around, come to class really late." She admittedly "wandered" around to access the social scene. Though, at times, Samantha actually had difficulty with the intensity of activity present at the high school. She states, "All day I kept thinking, what can I do to leave here, because it wasn't a good atmosphere. There were just too many people, too many things going on at once."

When I pressed the students to give more feedback about the current physical environment of RTC, Arianna responded that, "the building is too loud." This statement confused me because RTC is tiny, with many less students as compared to RHS. She seemed to have a need for the social interaction that high

school was able to fulfill, but when she was trying to get things done, or concentrate, she needed a quiet space. Henry made similar comments about the level and content of noise at Rosewood, "The kids get on my nerves because they don't know when to stop talking" and "they don't shut up in class."

Samantha commented on class sizes at RTC. "There should be smaller classrooms" she insisted. Similar to Arianna's comment about the social appeal of high school, Henry added, "I miss high school…because of friends." The type of socialization that high school could provide remained appealing for Samantha, Henry, and Arianna, yet they intuitively knew that, at times, they also needed access to smaller, quieter settings.

All four student participants were in special education setting II or III programs during high school. This means that they attended a combination of general education classes and special education classes. They all had the option of using their special education case manager's room as a resource room. Being able to move to an environment with less distraction, less students and more staff assistance seemed important to them. Samantha expressed this sentiment about her high school general education classes. "There were too many people and I couldn't pay attention…I could (though) go to Ms. Mary's room" (her high school special education teacher).

We have a very small "quiet room" in addition to classrooms at RTC, but it is shared by all the students and is often in high demand. It appeared that the student participants were not asking for one single type of environment for learning, they wanted flexibility throughout the day to move to environments with

activity and noise levels that coincided with their changing social, emotional and academic needs.

"I just want to make connections with other students more like me"

The importance of Meaningful Relationships with Peers

RTC is a setting IV transition program. This means it is a public school program where all the students served have been labeled with an educational disability. In contrast, all four student participants came from either setting II or setting III classrooms located in a public high school. At least part of the day they were educated along side their non-disabled peers. They also were able to interact with their non-disabled peers immediately before and after school, during passing time, at lunch and when engaged in extra-curricular activities.

There are no students without disabilities attending RTC, as it is a transition-only program and having an educational disability is a requirement of enrollment. There are, though, students with different disability labels attending RTC. There are students labeled with Developmental Cognitive Disabilities (DCD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Other Health Impairments (OHI), Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD).

Throughout the focus groups and the interviews the participants repeatedly talked about how their interactions with their peers at RTC affected them and their learning experience. At the very beginning of the first focus group I asked the students what they generally thought of their transition program. Samantha volunteered: "It's a good program-but I don't really fit there." Not "fitting in" could have meant many different things. When I asked her to explain her comment, a very interesting non-verbal reaction occurred between Samantha and

Arianna. They smiled at each other and then looked around. It seemed that I had asked for information that they both knew and yet were reluctant to share with me. Nevertheless, after a few long seconds, Samantha elaborated. "I wouldn't want to bring my friends to school. I didn't even want my dad in the building. I don't mean to be rude, but those (without an EBD label) students are different. Back in the day I would have been rude. I just want to make connections with other students more like me." Samantha knew her sentiments could be interpreted as "rude," but she wanted to differentiate between how she might have reacted to students she viewed as different in the past and how she reacts to the same type of student now. Arianna and Samantha both confirmed that they were referring to students with disabilities different from their own. Arianna offered an example. "Like when we go to the grocery store (as part of cooking class). You know how I disappear in the store. I mean, I know they are all EBD, but…" Her statement not only reveled her misperception that all the students at RTC were labeled EBD, but also that she viewed herself as different from the students with disabilities other than EBD. Samantha rephrased the issue from one of different disabilities to one of different problems. "I have problems too, but not like them, not like that. Right now, Evan and Arianna are the only ones that give me any good feedback, because they understand what I am going through." Arianna brought up the stress management group that she, Samantha and Evan had participated in earlier that year which was facilitated by RTC's social worker. The group consisted of students labeled DCD, ASD, OHI, SLD and EBD. The conversations that occurred within the stress management group, according to participants, only

seemed to magnify the differences between themselves and the students with different "problems." Samantha expressed this sentiment showing considerable frustration.

> Well, in stress management…I care about their problems, but they are the same (problems) every week and they are really really different from my problems, and, I think the problems that Evan and Henry and Arianna have. It's not bad, but it is really different and I wish we could be in a group that had people with some of the same issues we have had. Some of their problems are, obnoxious, and social problems. They talk about how they feel and they make it out to be so bad. I mean, Eric constantly talks about working at McDonalds and how stressful it is to put down the fries. And maybe it is stressful for him, but he makes it out to be worse than it is and he talks about the same thing every week and I just look at Evan and he looks at me and, I mean, I am not mad at these kids, but come on, I am dealing with really serious stuff here.

Evan agreed with Samantha. "It's ok to learn about different problems, but our own group would be good." Henry was not in the stress management group, but he was able to elaborate on how he thought support groups at RTC should be organized. "Small groups like if a student has OCD, them have an OCD group and if a student has AD/HD then have an AD/HD (group)."

It did not seem that Samantha or any of the other participants were expressing animosity towards the students they perceived as so different from

themselves. Rather, they were advocating for different settings resulting in an increase in interactions with those they perceive as more like themselves. Samantha was looking for "good feedback" which she felt she could not get from people who did not have "similar problems" and who did not understand what she was going through.

Samantha seemed to be asking for two things when she asked for "more people similar to (her), I mean with similar disabilities instead of so many different disabilities altogether" at the transition center. She was asking to be around more people with "similar disabilities," but, more importantly, she was also asking to be around people more "similar to (her)." The latter request removes the qualification of having a disability at all and reveals her desire to simply be around people with whom she feels most comfortable with, regardless of whether they have been labeled with a disability or not.

"Just be there to help, be respectful"

The Importance of Meaningful Relationships with Staff

Successful teaching is influenced by the quality of the relationships between the teacher or staff and the students. When asked to reflect on their experiences at RTC, all the student participants indicated that interactions with teachers and staff were important to them. Two aspects of staff interactions were identified by the participants as key; the manner in which staff encourage students to complete their work and the level and quality of staff support.

All of the participants wanted to talk about how staff should motivate students. Henry stated, "I like it (at RTC) because the teachers don't hover over you." I asked him to describe how that was different from his experience with teachers elsewhere. "They look over your shoulder constantly. They hover over you." All four students reiterated this sentiment repeatedly. Arianna commented that, "At RTC, if we don't do our work, it is our problem. Nagging doesn't help." Henry lamented on how he felt when teachers "nagged" him in high school. "It (the nagging) got on your nerves." The students' intense aversion to staff "hovering" and "nagging" was so great that, as Henry explained, it actually produced the opposite effect of the teachers' intent to get them to complete their work. He states, "The more you (staff) nag, the more we won't do anything." There was a definite note of defiance attached to his statement. Samantha expressed the same defiance. "If you had forced me (to do my work) then I would not end up coming. I would have stopped coming here," she said.

As a teacher at RTC, I knew that all the staff there spent quite a bit of energy trying to get the students to focus on class work and to complete their projects. I wanted to know if the rest of them felt that the staff "nagged" them or "hovered" over them at RTC. Samantha confirmed my suspicions. "Oh, yea. You all do tell us to do things. You can nag us too, but you do it in a certain way. Like you'll say, 'let's get going, so you can succeed." Her comments revealed that nagging could actually be positive, if it is done in a certain way. It was the manner in which the nagging was done that determined its acceptance and effectiveness. Evan described it as, "Just what you do, which is light nagging, not the Marge Simpson nagging." I repeatedly requested additional clarification on the good type of nagging. Samantha responded directly, "Just be there to help, be respectful."

Encouragement coupled with respect could be demonstrated by how teachers/staff asked students to complete their work. It implied that teachers/staff should continue to request that students complete their work, while still acknowledging that teachers and paraprofessionals cannot make them do anything. There was an extremely strong negative resentment towards any staff attitudes suggesting that they were going to make a student do anything. This resentment had an oppositional effect on students causing them to outright refuse to work simply because they perceived that the teacher was attempting to force them to do something.

The students valued respectful encouragement from the staff. Directly related to that was the particular quality and level of support available to the

students at RTC. Academic support was important, but so was social/emotional support.

There is a low ratio of staff to students at RTC. The average class teacher/staff to student ratio is approximately one to four respectively. Having a low staff ratio does not necessarily guarantee that students will receive the quality and level of support that they need, but the student participants seemed to be satisfied with the assistance they received at RTC and that was very important to them.

Evan contrasted the support he was able to get at RTC with his perception of the support he received in high school. "There is plenty of help (at RTC). You just raise your hand and someone is there. High school was different. You would raise your hand and half an hour later someone came by-a lot more help than high school."

Henry made several comments that highlighted the importance of quality emotional and social support available in the classroom. He described one behavior he had in high school that illustrated his point. "I always went to the nurse and said I was sick just to get out of doing the work in class." He made this comment in one of the focus groups and when I asked him to elaborate, he looked very uncomfortable and would not. During his interview, separate from the other participants, I again asked him to explain why he felt like he had to go to the nurse to get out of doing work. This time he went into more detail. "Kids were picking on me and the teachers don't do anything and they're not honest." In an attempt to clarify his response, I asked him if he meant that the kids were not

being honest. He responded adamantly, "The teachers were not being honest!" Henry was actually making two separate comments. He was complaining that the other students were picking on him and that the teachers didn't do anything to stop the kids from picking on him. He was also accusing the teachers of not being honest. He went on to explain his perception of their dishonesty in more detail. "They give you bad grades and don't explain why. My dad would look at what I did and say it was fine and then they would still give you a bad grade. The teachers wanted to fail me. They don't give good feedback."

At first Henry claimed that the reason he feigned sickness in high school was to get out of doing class work, which could be construed as commentary on his perceived poor quality of academic support in his high school classroom. Henry then indicated that his fleeing to the nurse was due to harassment from other students and the teachers' failure to address their behavior. The latter suggests the importance of social and emotional support in the classroom. I suspected that both of his explanations were probably true at one time or another. Henry was upset about the teachers not addressing the students who were teasing him, but he was also upset that he went to the trouble of having his dad approve his academic work, and then have the teachers still give him a poor grade without explaining why or how the perspectives of a teacher and his dad may honestly differ. As a result, Henry began to believe that the teachers wanted to fail him. Inherent was the idea that good feedback, or effective communication, is a necessary component of support in the classroom. Again, this information

suggested how important both social/emotional and academic support were and even more important how they were inextricably linked.

Henry had a more optimistic opinion of how well the staff at RTC were able to assist him. When I asked him to describe positive aspects of RTC, he replied, "How most staff communicates with you. They are there not just to teach because they are just doing their job but they want you to succeed. There is more support (than high school)."

Again and again the students reiterated that having enough support, and the quality of that support was an important influence on how they felt about their school/transition experience. Arianna stated that, "Here (at RTC), I can get help, but if I don't do my work, I know it's my fault." Samantha said, "They (teachers/staff) don't give up on students." Interestingly, the idea of support being a careful balancing act re-appears again. The students do not want teachers to approach them in a "nagging" way or with the mindset that they can make a student do work. Yet, in the above comment, Samantha shares how she appreciated it when teachers/staff respectfully "don't give up on students."

Each passing school involves a renegotiation of the student/teacher responsibility contract. Naturally, first grade students will be given more autonomy and responsibility than that which was the model in Kindergarten. Arguably, the jump from high school to transition must be even more drastic as it is the very purpose and nature of transition to have the students move out of the public school system and into their respective communities. Supporting students in a transition center should look considerably different than supporting students

in K-12. It is important to remember that if the goal of a transition program is to foster productive, healthy, happy, contributing adult members of society then the modeling must be of adults working with other adults more a kin to a higher education model. The students in this study communicated their need to be treated as adults when they are receiving instruction. As Samantha stated, "If I don't do my work, I know it's my fault." It may be difficult for some staff to both provide quality instructional experiences and still be willing to let the students succeed or fail as this is an authentic adult experience that the students will undoubtedly encounter after they have left public school.

Chapter VI: Discussion

Overview of Study

This research sought to gain the perspectives of students labeled EBD on their transition programs. Educators and researchers have deliberated extensively among themselves on how they can improve student outcomes. Unfortunately, the students are often the last to be consulted and the first to be affected by changes in policy and practice. A lack of student input into this area was what prompted me to undertake this research. I questioned how we as educators even know what to research when we have yet to ask our students what factors they perceive as relevant in their education. Considering the perspectives of students becomes even more crucial when the students are adults of transition age who are expected to not only be active participants in their education but active members of their communities.

Recommendations-The Need for Meaningful Curriculum

There is nothing preventing an IEP team from creating a student program that is more focused on functional and/or vocational skills while a student is still attending high school. Transition services should start at age 16 and are a legally mandated part of the IEP. IEP teams should not delay transition services until a student lacks the credits to graduate from high school and then must remain in public school past their senior year. This is what happened to Samantha, Evan and Henry. The student and their IEP team should make decisions about career preparation at the beginning of the transition process and continue the implementation and development process throughout high school. Transition

services that have been identified as a beneficial part of a student's secondary education should be evaluated, and when deemed appropriate, extended into the student's post-secondary program. As was communicated by the participants, an additional year or two of high school remediation classes held little significance in their self-identified life goals. Yet, they continued to need some of the supports offered through public school transition services.

If students have barriers, such unmet mental heath needs, preventing a student from learning, they too should be addressed. All high school students, whether or not they receive special education services are expected to go through this process. If you want to be a doctor, you need to take all the college preparatory advance placement science classes that are offered. If you want to be a musician, you begin taking private lessons and get involved in school and/or community musical groups. However, there is such a push from federal legislation, such as NCLB, that teachers often feel compelled to continually focus on purely academic state standards and standardized testing. If a student, like Samantha, repeatedly identifies that cosmetology is her career of choice, and her IEP team supports her decision based on her ability, aptitude, and preference, why should she be compelled to take subjects in her senior year that are not required for success in attending a cosmetology program or for a meaningful career in that field? According to NCLB, she must. Much of what Samantha accomplished at RTC could have been completed while she was in high school, with the support of her IEP team. Instead she was forced into classes that continued to frustrate her to the point of dropping out.

How can we balance federal and state mandated standards and standardized testing with the actual functional and vocational needs of a student with a disability label? This can and is being done on a micro-level in individual teacher classrooms. Students should have the time and resources to self-identify what motivates them to succeed. What do they need and want for themselves? What do they want for a career? Does the student have a realistic idea of their potential? Once the student has answered these questions, it is then the job of the teacher to relate all learning and activities back to the student's self-identified goal. Progress towards the goal must be broken down into smaller steps. As students make progress, the teacher should continually reinforce how each accomplishment moves them one step closer to achieving their self-identified goals.

Asking teachers to balance what the student really needs to do to reach his/her transition goals both functional and vocational, while at the same time teach all the state standards and prepare the student for standardized testing, is a daunting task. Inevitably, something will be left out. How do we meet state standards while acknowledging that students with the EBD label have a disability that requires unique support to increase their chance of success? Providing these students with effective transition skills may not be possible if their underlying disability is not addressed first. Mental illness affects a student's ability to perform in school/transition. Students labeled EBD cannot be expected to focus on academic or transition skills when they are simultaneously battling mental illness (Armstrong, Dedrick & Greenbaum, 2003). Addressing the mental health

needs of a student labeled EBD must be part of their curriculum. But due to NCLB, teachers are often forced to choose between allocating limited school hours teaching what they professionally judge as appropriate curriculum for the unique needs of their students and teaching to mandated state standards and standardized testing. This impossible balancing act is totally unsustainable and could have devastating consequences for society when these students leave the school system and become adults in society. Many may continue to suffer with mental illness as they attempt to navigate their communities without the support of the school system the impact of which could be disastrous (Wagner et al., 2005). Balancing student mental health needs and transition needs with NCLB standards and testing requirements within the confines of a school day is a problem that must be addressed. Teachers in isolation cannot solve this problem. It is systemic within public education. More research and subsequent curative legislation is needed.

Recommendations-The Need for Conducive Environments

Initially, it seemed that the participants were asking for two mutually exclusive environments at the transition center. They wanted social interaction, but they wanted it quiet at times too. Their moods fluctuated throughout the day. Henry often complained that other students disrupted him while he was trying to work. Yet, he also shared how he hated to be in a totally silent room and that it made him nervous. Adults, in comparison to students, generally have much more freedom to create spaces around themselves that allow them to feel comfortable. Some environmental accommodations are possible in a school setting just as some

environmental accommodations are possible in vocational and community settings.

Helping students who have significant mental health needs to negotiate environments and self-advocate for accommodations that enable them to function in the community is teaching a skill they can transfer to a post-secondary and/or vocational setting. A classroom, transition-based or otherwise, should only be as ridged as is absolutely needed to accomplish the goals of the lesson. Just as employers must make reasonable accommodations available to their employers with disabilities, so should teachers.

Transition centers should offer a variety of environments where students can succeed, including social environments, quiet spaces, large and small rooms and brightly lit and dimly lit rooms. The job of the teacher is to teach the student what is reasonable to ask for as an accommodation in the community or on the job as well as how to develop coping mechanisms for situations when moving to a different environment is not a possibility.

Recommendations-The Need for Meaningful Relationships with Peers

RTC is located in a K-12 school building and when students attend there they are only able to interact with other students their age that have been labeled with an educational disability. According to IDEA, 2004 the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requires school districts to place students in an environment that allows them to interact as much as possible with their "non-disabled peers" while still receiving all the services they need.

Transition is different from K-12. Students must have an educational disability in order to participate in school-based transition programs. Their "non-disabled peers" are typically attending four-year or two-year colleges, technical training programs or working in the community. An alternative to segregating transition students entirely within the educationally disabled population would be to honor the intention of LRE and locate transition programs within the community at a community college, technical school or in a more vocational setting where the students who attend can interact equally with people who have been labeled disabled, and with those have not been labeled disabled. This would expose students to a greater diversity of their peer population and would reflect the true diversity of most communities.

Recommendations-The Need for Meaningful Relationships with Staff

The participants went out of their way to make sure I understood that how the teachers/staff regarded them was important. Relationships with teachers/staff directly impacted how they perceived the program and their own ability to succeed. Many students become legal adults at the age of eighteen while still in high school. Eighteen or not, high school students are in a precarious place. Society expects them to act like responsible adult citizens, and yet, they still need permission from their teacher to use the restroom. There are definitely some mixed messages there. Students labeled with disabilities may experience this discrepancy in an even more extreme version as their ability to function as a young adult compared to a non-disabled peer is often questioned in various ways.

The essence of transition is to prepare a young adult with disabilities function to the very best of his or her ability as an autonomous, contributing and mature member of their community. The four participants in this research commented on how important it was that transition staff communicated with them as adults. Treating transition students as adults is one way that staff can model respectful relationship building. Staff should encourage students to complete their work and make progress in manner that demonstrates respect and acknowledges that students should not and cannot be "made" to do anything. Transition students must be allowed the dignity inherent in owning their successes as well as their failures, as this is how all young adults, whether they are labeled as disabled or not, meaningfully learn to be responsible adult members of their community.

Emerging Questions for Future Research

Although it was not the focus of this research, my questions and the students' answers made direct commentary on their high school experiences. Many of the students' frustrations were related to the lack of respect they felt in high school. They felt that staff was always telling them what to do and not listening to their self-identified goals. To be fair, high school teachers are mandated to teach to state standards and standardized tests, which does not leave a lot of time for instruction of transition skills or the more specific goals of the individual student within the five transition areas. How can we balance state standards and testing preparation with the students' self-identified goals in the five transition areas all within the time limits of the high school day?

Only students with an educational disability and unmet needs in one or more of the five transition areas attend transition programs. The federal setting at RTC is setting IV, which means the students who attend there are segregated with only disabled peers for more than 50% of their day. Not all transition programs are setting IV. Some transition programs are located within a community setting such as a technical school or community college giving the students more access to their non-disabled peers. The students are able to participate in campus student life, student clubs, as well as athletic and other social activities. Students attending transition centers that are isolated or more closely aligned with a K-12 setting miss an important opportunity to interact with other same-age students not labeled as disabled. This sentiment, the ability to be around peers with a wider variety of abilities was a reoccurring topic within this research. The question of whether or not segregated transition settings are an educationally or even a morally sound practice should be examined. Legal questions also arise. Is it a denial of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and/or a violation of federal civil rights to require that all students who are eligible to attend a transition program due to their disability be placed in a federal setting IV program simply because that is all that a district has to offer?

How can we define transition programs for students 18-21 as community-based programs outside of the high school mentality/environment? One promising possibility may be the development of collaborative K-12 transition program located at a community college (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2010). This type of

collaboration could offer specific skills and vocational training while still providing needed transition supports for students with identified disabilities.

This study did not attempt to either qualitatively or quantitatively prove whether or not specific curriculum or practices increase positive long-term outcomes for students in the five transition areas. With the caveat that each student requires a personal and unique educational experience, further research regarding what constitutes best practice for producing favorable outcomes in the five areas of transition would be valuable.

Chapter VII: Self-Reflection

Managing the K-12 educational system as a student was quite a feat for me. Academics were not the problem; it was incredulity, and boredom, that made the days so long. Although I rarely had the guts to question the actions or even the logic of a teacher, I secretly admired those who did and did it well. I liked the clever students who, through humor, or just a sincere need for attention broke the orderly school spell we were under for just a moment. They reminded us all that we were really just a bunch of people anyway. Not all students who talk out of turn, question the rules or cause the occasional mild disruption have something important to say; however, it is hard to know what is important, spoken or unspoken, if the only person in the room being heard is the teacher.

Educational systems are systems engineered for an efficiency that works well for the many. Yet this efficiency often exacts the minimization of individuality as well as a tragic loss of potential for some students, who for one reason or another, do not function well within the system. Society losses a lot when they do not hear everyone.

I was these student participants' teacher and the researcher simultaneously during this project and I am sure, despite my best intentions, this may have affected their responses. Optimistically, I hope our dual relationships only made them more comfortable sharing personal information; however, I cannot know this for sure. I deliberately tried to schedule the focus groups and some interviews outside of the transition center to provide a more neutral setting for the

participants. They did seem more relaxed there, in the community, than I had ever seen them at RTC.

When I began this research I definitely had several preconceived ideas about what I thought students labeled EBD wanted from their transition programs. I adamantly believed that what they really yearned for was total control over their own education and to make their own independent decisions at all times. It took a lot of painful deprogramming for me to let go of my bias. During this process I began to see other instances, here and there, where I had made assumptions about education or students that were not necessarily based in anyone else's truth but my own. While elements of my original assumptions appeared from time to time during the research process, control was not as big of an issue as I had initially predicted. Unfortunately, I am sure I began my focus groups still holding onto my own ideas of what was important to these students. Because of this I worry that many of the questions I asked at the beginning, or even the way I chose to phrase the questions, may have had an impact on how the students felt and responded. Thanks to their insistence on always bringing the conversation back to what they wanted to say, I finally began to follow their lead and let go of my prefabricated conclusions. Thinking back I feel alarmed at how much vital and constructive information I would have missed had I continued to insist upon my already formulated hypotheses. While I am sure that some of the time some of my students do feel a strong need for control (as we all do), it was not what they expressed as most important. The quality of their relationships with staff and peers, the dynamics of the environment where they were learning and what was

meaningful curriculum was much more important to the students involved in this research. I hope to use the information I gained to help improve the program where I teach and my own skills as a transition teacher. The yields of this research now seem like just the beginning of the real work that must be done. I am grateful for what these four students shared with me and I will build upon their experiences.

Looking back, I realize that having control in school was more my need, not theirs. Not speaking up, accepting the rules, doing work I found of little value got me A's, but made me feel powerless. Automatically, I assumed that my students must feel the same and thus their EBD label may have been at least partially granted due to their ability to speak up in school, to challenge a system I was never able to challenge as a student. Letting go of this transference of values was a long process. In retrospect, it seems ridiculous how ardently I fought for my perception. I now see what an overwhelming presence a strong bias can be.

As this research ends, I am especially cognizant of watching myself as I interact with my students. This experience has made me a profoundly better listener and hopefully a better partner in my students' educational experiences.

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Appendix A

Interview/Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. How would you describe the transition program you are enrolled in?

2. Describe what is working well for you in your transition program.

3. Describe what you would change about your transition program.

4. How would you envision the best possible transition program?

5. Compare and contrast your high school experiences and your transition program experiences. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

6. Explain the role you think a student in a transition program should have during the IEP process.

Appendix B

Perspectives of Students Labeled with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) on their Transition Programs

Consent Form

You are invited to be in a research study of the perspectives of students with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) on their transition programs. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a student who is enrolled in a school-based transition program with a disability designation of EBD. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by me (Allison Gardner) as part of my master's project in education at Augsburg College. My advisor's name is; Elizabeth Ankeny, Associate Professor at Augsburg College.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to obtain the perspectives of students labeled EBD attending transition programs. Your opinions and responses shared during the focus groups and interview will be very important parts of the study.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things, participate in two separate focus groups (45-60 minutes each session) with a total of up to five other students in the program, and consent to a separate interview (if requested) with the researcher that may last up to 45-60 minutes about information that was shared during the focus groups. The first two sessions are focus groups, the third session, if requested by the researcher (Allison Gardner), will be conducted as an interview between you (the participant) and the researcher only. Real names will not be used during the project. I will use quotes from you in my study; however real names or any other identification will not be used with quotes. Another teacher in the transition program will conduct class with students who are not participating in the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
The study has a minimal risk: While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small number to be studied. There are minimal risks associated with this study. Participation in focus groups and/or interviews is voluntary. If you experience anxiety or frustration at any time during the focus groups and/or interviews, you can quit the focus group and/or the interview. Kim Johnson, school social worker at the Bloomington Transition Center, will be available for consultation.

The indirect benefits for you include the opportunity to share your perspectives on the transition program. Your opinions may provide input for current and future programming.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. The results will be presented at the Augsburg Symposium and a copy of the results will be placed in the Augsburg Library. A copy of the results will also be kept on file at the Bloomington Public School's District Service Center and the results will be shared with Bloomington Transition Center and Bloomington Public School staff. Research participants will also have access to the final report. All data will be kept in a locked file in my office. Only my advisor, Elizabeth Ankeny and I will have access to the data. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data will be destroyed. While I will make every

effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small number to be studied.

All raw data will be destroyed August 31, 2013.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with me, Augsburg College, or Bloomington Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Allison Gardner. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at: 952.681.6263.
My advisor is Elizabeth Ankeny, Associate Professor at Augsburg College, ankeny@augsburg.edu, 612-330-1548

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statements of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of participant's consent _____
Date_____

Signature of parent or guardian _____
Date_____
(when applicable)

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____
Date_____

I consent to allow use of the quotations of _____in the published document (parents/guardians).
(participant's name)
Signature _____
Date_____
(when applicable)

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